

Carbon as Creation: On Tsuji Naoyuki's Charcoal Anime

Think about where to move the lines to next. Rip off a piece of bread and dab at the paper, pulling the carbon residue off the page. Pick up a stick of charcoal and draw some new lines a little to the side of the ones you just erased. Record this new image onto a few frames of film. Repeat once you decide where to take the lines next.

This is how you create a charcoal anime. This looping method takes anime back to the basics, rooting it to the manual encounter between hand, carbon, and paper. Tsuji Naoyuki (b. 1972) pioneered the style in Japan, at a time when most anime was pushing further into digital technology and increasing layers of electronic mediation. Charcoal anime strips these layers away instead.

After graduating with a degree in sculpture from Tokyo Zōkei University in 1995 and experimenting with stop-motion animation, Tsuji began developing short sequences of monochrome charcoal drawings and recording them on 16mm film. *A Feather Stare at the Dark* (1995–2003, *Yami o mitsumeru hane*) and *Trilogy about Clouds* (2005, *Mittsu no kumo*) both went on to screen at the Directors' Fortnight at the Cannes Film Festival, securing Tsuji's place as a central figure in the burgeoning world of Japanese art animation. Like many working in the field, Tsuji situates his work at a complex remove from

TSUJI'S TURN TO CHARCOAL CAN BE UNDERSTOOD AS A RETURN TO THE HAND, AN ATTEMPT TO INSERT THE PHYSICAL ACT OF DRAWING BACK INTO THE HYPER-MEDIATION AND VISUAL EXCESS OF CONTEMPORARY ANIME PRODUCTION.

the commercial anime industry, presenting it at festivals, screenings, museums, and galleries, but without denying the influence of more mainstream trends in anime style. Inspired as a youth by the manga duo Yudetamago (Shimada Takashi and Nakai Yoshinori), Tsuji initially approached the pair to become their apprentice but, on seeing their original manuscripts in person, found himself overwhelmed by the size and complexity of series

like *Ultimate Muscle* (1979–, *Kinnikuman*). Instead, he eventually turned to the more diminutive but carefully crafted world of charcoal anime. Operating at a similar frame rate to limited animation (with several frames of film per still image), Tsuji's work adopts even greater material limitations. Tsuji's turn to charcoal can be understood as a return to the hand, an attempt to insert the physical act of drawing back into the hyper-mediation and visual excess of contemporary anime production.

As W. J. T. Mitchell writes, “drawing remains closest to the center of the vortex of image production [. . .] emanating from and returning to the body.”¹ The hand drawn helps to slow down contemporary media's rapid succession of images and renders the initial contact between body and paper perceptible once again. Rosalind Krauss notes “the upsurge of the autographic, the handwrought, in an age of the mechanization and technologizing of the image via either photography or digital imaging.”² While shared by a number of Japanese art animators, this return to the hand drawn is nowhere more vivid than in Tsuji's charcoal anime, where the residue of each gestural movement of the carbon remains on the page, the bread eraser never completely clearing the trace of what came before (Figure 1).

To make charcoal for drawing, pieces of wood are packed tightly in airtight containers and heated under the subsiding embers of a fire, then cooled slowly. The more prolonged the heating, the softer the charcoal that results. The sticks Tsuji uses are composed of the rough and impure carbon produced by the burnt wood of willow trees, producing particularly dark tones well suited for capture on film. When applied, this charcoal sits rough upon the page, its microscopic flakes splintering and scattering unevenly across the surface of the paper.³ Charcoal is too coarse a medium for sketching out fine detail or crisp lines, favoring instead broad, vigorous strokes emphasizing mass and movement. Drawing with charcoal often involves articulating not just the hand but elbow and torso as well.

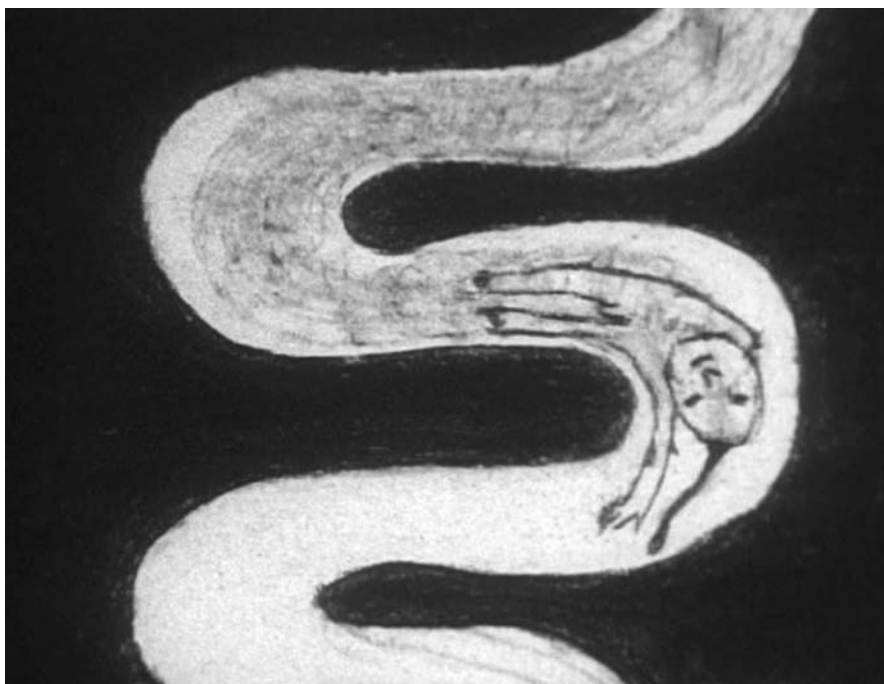


FIGURE 1. The boy in *A Feather Stare at the Dark* moves by being drawn, erased, and drawn again, leaving a trail of charcoal residue in his wake. *Thinking and Drawing: Japanese Art Animation of the New Millennium* (Image Forum Video/Daguerreo Press, 2005).

Charcoal markings do not “dry” in the manner of paint or ink, leaving them continuously malleable on the page. The lines can be erased, smudged, and redrawn, their contour shifted a minute later, a month later, a year later. As a result of this insistent malleability, drawings in charcoal for a long time suffered from a lack of permanence, though they proved quite durable when left alone. Some of the earliest drawings still in existence, at the caves of Altamira and Niaux, are renditions in charcoal. Just barely hanging on to the rock walls, these sketches must now be actively protected as they are just as primed to shift and dissolve now as they were when originally conceived more than ten thousand years ago. The expressive power of charcoal images comes in part from how they preserve the mutability of the initial moment of drawing, resisting the patina of age and decay that sets in with most other materials.

Most charcoal drawings did not have the protection of the caves, of course, and for centuries, charcoal remained but an interstitial medium, a good tool for sketching out a plan but rarely the one used for the final product. Underdrawings and preparatory studies in charcoal were usually tossed aside

on the way to more durable media like oil and stone. From the late fifteenth century, however, charcoal drawing achieved greater permanence thanks to the invention of the “fixative,” a spray applied to finished works to secure the carbon in place and preserve it from further alteration.

With the emergence of photography, a less invasive approach to fixing charcoal became available. Unlike the fixative spray, the camera’s registration of light reflecting off the carbon did not prevent the continued manipulation of the carbon itself. By preserving a space for the hand to come between the drawing paper and the fixative of photographic film, the possibility of both fixing and further moving the charcoal emerged—in other words, the possibility of charcoal animation. With the arrival of the motion picture camera, the movement of charcoal itself could be fixed in a photographic series. As with stop-motion animation, each manipulation of the charcoal image could be recorded on a few frames of film, then shown in sequence to render alterations to the drawing perceptible as continuous movement. By means of film, charcoal could now seemingly move by itself—the hand disappearing into the spaces between the frames even as it leaves its traces everywhere on the canvas.

Oscar Fischinger was the first to develop charcoal animation as a practice, creating his groundbreaking abstract charcoal animation *Studies* (1929–34, *Studie Nr. 2–13*) while working for Fritz Lang in Berlin in the late 1920s. Paired with music, the works screened in theaters in Europe, the United States, and Japan. Canadian animator Ryan Larkin experimented with charcoal animation in the 1960s, and in recent decades William Kentridge brought the medium to wider attention through his widely exhibited *9 Drawings for Projection* (1989–2003), a series of deeply moving ruminations on South African cultural memory.

Part of this diminutive but distinguished lineage of charcoal animators, Tsuji’s work is distinctive both for its monochrome austerity and its conscious alignment with anime (as opposed to *animeeshon*) as a form. Tsuji’s animations are also unique in their use of close-ups, where the camera cuts in to magnify one portion of the drawing. These shots imitate the grammar of live-action cinema by focusing in on a character’s facial expressions. Unlike a live-action close-up, however, the charcoal close-up magnifies not only facial details but also the materiality of the medium itself, revealing in greater detail the grain of the carbon and the paper it rests upon (Figure 2).

Drawing attention to the texture of the paper and the fragility of the medium, Tsuji’s work echoes the surface consciousness of the earlier cave charcoals, where the drawn lines often seem to engage directly with the texture of



FIGURE 2. The “close-up” from *A Feather Stare at the Dark*, revealing both the woman’s body and the texture of the carbon on the page. *Thinking and Drawing: Japanese Art Animation of the New Millennium* (Image Forum Video/Daguerreo Press, 2005).

the walls they sit on. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty wrote of the Lascaux caves, “the animals painted on the walls of Lascaux are not there in the same way as the fissures and limestone formations. But they are not *elsewhere*. Pushed forward here, held back there, held up by the wall’s mass they use so adroitly, they spread around the wall without ever breaking from their elusive moorings in it.”⁴ By drawing the viewer back toward the contours of the paper, Tsuji’s work similarly pulls anime back to a focus of the surface of inscription, to the moment of contact between animator and canvas. The charcoal stays close to its origins in burnt wood, and the animated lines stay rooted in the mutual push and pull of paper, hand, and bread.

SLOWING ANIME DOWN

Unlike the cel animator, who assembles a series of drawings to produce the illusion of continuous movement, or the digital animator, who works nonlinearly through a series of software commands, the charcoal animator sticks to

a single piece of paper for the entirety of a sequence, manually erasing and redrawing the image over and over to create a film one shot at a time. Cel and digital animation both leave a collection of frames behind, with the potential to use or modify them again later if needed. The draw-shoot-redraw-shoot rhythm of charcoal animation leaves nothing behind but the very last image of each sequence, smudged with the residual traces of lines drawn for earlier shots. As each sequence of a film progresses, the paper is gradually covered over with the shadows of Tsuji's previous lines, so that each new movement arises not from a blank page (or a fresh cel), but out of the foggy carbonate echo of each movement that came before.

The music for Tsuji's charcoal films, improvised on bass guitar by his partner Takanashi Makiko, echoes the slow gestural quality of the medium. In Takanashi's playing, "every stroke of the musician's hand is audible, accentuating the tactile and intimate nature of the drawings."⁵ The low rumble of the bass resonates with the dark registers of the charcoal, and the way Takanashi's repeated patterns often slide from the free play of rising and falling melodic lines into a muddle of low tones matches the resistant smudge of the charcoal as it makes its way across the paper.

Like William Kentridge, Tsuji does not use storyboards or other planning tools prior to recording, preferring to allow the state of the drawing at each moment to determine where the film goes next:

My method is quite simple. I sit in front of the paper and wait for an idea. When I get an idea, I draw it down and click the shutter a few times. Then I erase a bit and redraw and click the shutter a few more times, and so on. So it's random, yet with direction, ordered towards the future. I start with no set idea for the film. Each image I draw and photograph creates suggestions which lead to the next image, and these images build up inside me as the film advances. The reason I take this approach to filmmaking is to pursue the unique possibilities of this particular medium, which doesn't require any special preparation beforehand other than charcoal and paper.⁶

Drawing hints from the flexibility of charcoal itself, Tsuji allows his own embodied intuition to substitute for a more carefully plotted narrative trajectory:

It might be easier for the audience to understand if I make a precise storyline, but if I do that there isn't much of a point in using charcoal. It feels appropriate to allow more flexibility with the contents of the image, and create together with my own biorhythms.⁷

In recording the spontaneous modification of a single drawing as he reflects on what came before and how the film might move forward, Tsuji departs radically from the well-plotted temporality of cel animation. His working process renders the time of anime aleatory and imminent, persistently returning to the open-ended encounter

between hand and paper. This irreducibly linear style of working gives equal weight to each moment of the film. Whereas cel and digital animators usually focus on “key” frames to articulate the fundamentals of a movement and only later have an assistant or a computer fill in the inbetweens, for charcoal animators every subsequent image presents the opportunity for the film to spin off in a new direction. This causes the flow of the film to stutter at times. A character’s movement is momentarily arrested or suddenly switches directions. The carbon’s refusal to move smoothly forward repeatedly draws viewer attention back to the labor involved in the act of drawing, redrawing, and photographing by hand.

In her analysis of Kentridge’s *9 Drawings for Projection*, Rosalind Krauss notes how “it is this very density and weight of the drawing, this way it has of producing the hiccup of a momentary stillness and thus dragging against the flow of the film, that opens up the gap between [the charcoal] medium and that of film itself.”⁸ Krauss examines how this weight runs counter to the frequent association (going back to Sergei Eisenstein) of animation and image plasticity. As Eisenstein noted, the near weightless immateriality of the animation cel often tempts animators to indulge in rapid transformations of form, exploring modes of embodiment freed from gravity and the laws of physics. In charcoal animation, however, the linear, labor-intensive process and the insistent materiality of the carbon helps put the brakes on animation’s tendency toward swift transformations. Krauss notes Kentridge’s “sense that this transformative power needs to have a certain drag placed on it, a certain resistance or pressure exerted against its weightless fluidity.”⁹ In Tsuji’s work, charcoal’s material resistance works as a counter to anime’s usual tendency toward metamorphic excess. Tsuji’s use of 16mm film, with its own manual limitations, lends additional layers of mediated slowness and textural drag.

This insistence on slower forms of materiality works its way into the content of the drawings themselves. Krauss points to Kentridge’s repeated focus on the most basic gestural repertoires of the body: small movements of the head and limbs, breathing lungs, and beating hearts. Tsuji’s work meanwhile

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appears obsessed with the effects of gravity, presenting bodies seated, lying down, or walking with slow and deliberate strides. Occasionally, characters overcome the weight of the body through winged flight or by transforming their body into a gaseous state, only to later come crashing, Icarus-style, back down to earth.

Film critic Kitakōji Takashi recalls that when Tsuji was asked why he chose to study sculpture in college, he half-jokingly described wanting to use sculpture to “develop his body.” Kitakōji takes him at his word, observing how this early sculptural attention to weight and volume carries over to inform Tsuji’s approach to animation.¹⁰ Tsuji’s films draw on the materiality of charcoal to depict the tension between anime’s promise of physical transcendence, and the weight and drag of the human body in all its stubborn inertia.

STARING AT THE DARK

This tension is particularly evident in Tsuji’s first major work of charcoal anime, *A Feather Stare at the Dark*. The character designs in this work echo the late nineteenth-century charcoal “noirs” of Odilon Redon: angels, skeletal demons, and winged orbs with human faces float across symbolist landscapes governed by a pantheon of naked mythic creatures. The film’s central focus is on the construction and destruction of worlds. Tsuji provides a partial summary of the first few minutes of the film on his blog:

Male and female gods with large wings make a baby as they fly through the sky. After a while a boy is born, and the male god creates a world for his son. One time while the son is sleeping his left hand turns into a woman, who goes off somewhere. The boy sets off travelling in search of the woman, wandering through a newly created woods. He looks through a hole in one of the trees and glimpses a different world [*betsusekai*] beyond it. He crawls into the hole to go to the other world, but falls asleep before emerging out the other end. A dead skeleton god pulls the boy fully into this other world . . .¹¹

The rest of the seventeen-minute film further extrapolates on this mythic search for the woman, freely mixing different religious and folkloric iconographies. At moments the film appears to reference charcoal’s own ability to imagine new universes, as when the boy reaches the other world by passing through a tree.¹²

After waking up in this other world, the boy discovers a volcano that

begins to erupt profusely, covering him and the surrounding landscape. The film cuts back to the winged father god, now giant in size. The skeleton returns and transforms into a demon woman, who flies to the god's genitals and quickly brings him to a giant orgasm. The semen begins to spill out continuously in an unstoppable flood, covering the forest and giving instant life to hundreds of small humans (Figure 3) as well as a city for them to live within.

A Feather Stare at the Dark includes persistent nudity and the frank depiction of sexual pleasure, sexual pain, and bodily excretions. The latter include not just semen but the ingestion and defecation of the human characters by the giant gods. As Tsuji hints in an interview, the seeming innocence and imprecision of the charcoal medium allows him to get away with these kinds of images, presenting them not as something vulgar or scatological but as part of what Kitakōji calls the broader “ecological thought” running through his work.¹³ The use and reuse of the black carbon particles to depict these physical transformations lend an organic unity to this rapid circulation of energies.

However, the film shows how these unbounded transformations quickly begin to undermine themselves in their very excess. The boy takes revenge

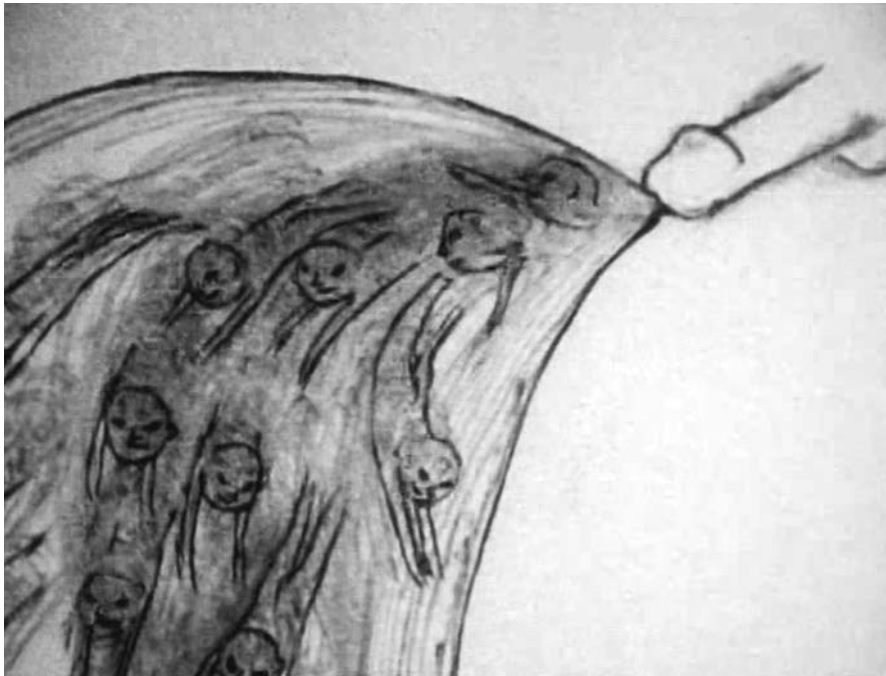


FIGURE 3. The father god's inadvertent but ultra-productive orgasm, miming the unwieldy creative potential of the charcoal stick. *Thinking and Drawing: Japanese Art Animation of the New Millennium* (Image Forum Video/Daguerreo Press, 2005).

on his father, cutting off the giant god's wing in exchange for the earlier loss of his own arm. This act of revenge triggers a spiraling apocalypse where the world gradually begins to crumble, only to give way to new worlds in turn. These transitions feature rapid shifts of scale and swift physical metamorphoses, in familiar anime style. Yet the film also attends closely to the fatigue that follows from these orgasmic bursts of productivity. As noted above, the boy falls asleep on his way to the other world, a scene the film returns to in its ending credits. The god's facial expression shows not pleasure but annoyance at the spilling of his seed. And at the end of the film, after the cosmic upheaval, we witness the various gods assembled in a room inside the sun for a kind of apocalyptic after-party, sitting around a dining table and sharing a bottle of wine. The boy, clearly bored with the gathering, gets up and heads for the door. In moments like these, the film introduces doubts about anime's desire for transformative freedom, presenting tired, heavy bodies as if they were bearing the fatigue of Tsuji's own fecund imagination.

This questioning of anime's omnipotent fantasies of creation and destruction has its roots in the artist's struggle to make sense of the apocalyptic desires driving violent behavior in Japan and overseas during the years Tsuji was working on the film. Enthusiastic about new age forms of spirituality during his college years, Tsuji recalls his shock at the transformation of Aum Shinrikyō from a yoga-practicing new religion into a terrorist doomsday cult. The group launched their sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway in March 1995, just as Tsuji was about to graduate from art college.¹⁴ This stark reminder of the dark side of the mythic imagination cast a pall over his early work on *A Feather Stare at the Dark*, and for a time he stopped working on the film entirely. After finally moving to continue with the work in the early 2000s, the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the subsequent war in Iraq again forced him to confront the tragic hubris of fantasies of world creation and destruction. Looking back on the film, he describes it as the trace of his own confused "search for the world" amid these unsettling events around the turn of the millennium.¹⁵

The final scene of the "good" and "evil" gods relaxing together with a bottle of wine radically relativizes the apocalyptic struggle acted out earlier in the film: the little people may have had their whole world destroyed, but the gods in charge appear to have enjoyed putting on the show (Figure 4). The boy, neglecting to touch his wine, unceremoniously leaves the gods at the table and opens the door to look outside. There, floating in a peaceful pastoral landscape, he finds a floating dark mass of charcoal. This soon resolves into the form of the woman born from his arm (Figure 5).



FIGURE 4. The dinner party of the gods, with the bored boy seated at right. *Thinking and Drawing: Japanese Art Animation of the New Millennium* (Image Forum Video/Daguerreo Press, 2005).



FIGURE 5. As the boy looks on, the dark mass of charcoal resolves itself into the figure of the woman. *Thinking and Drawing: Japanese Art Animation of the New Millennium* (Image Forum Video/Daguerreo Press, 2005).

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The boy's turn from the violent play of the gods to the more contained physicality of his naked female companion—born from his own (drawing?) hand—stages Tsuji's rejection of anime's imaginative excesses in both aesthetic and gendered terms. The intemperate male potency portrayed earlier in the film contrasts with the immanent physicality of the pastoral female nude, as the guiding desire

shifts from one of mythic world creation and destruction to a search for the restorative embrace of woman-as-charcoal-as-nature. Rejecting apocalyptic fantasy, the film hearkens back to an older fantasy from the age of romanticism, rooted in the more familiar physicality of carbon-based life-forms. Unlike the continuous and often violent movements of the gods, the woman stands still, patiently and smilingly accepting the boy's gaze. The subject of the film's earlier (and only) close-up, she finally pulls the film away from animation and back to the welcoming simplicity of the still image.

While other contemporaneous anime also grappled with questions of physical transcendence and apocalyptic desire, *A Feather Stare at the Dark* is unusual in pursuing these questions so deeply into the materiality of drawing itself.¹⁶ Diminutive and slow in an age of imaginative excess, the film distances itself from anime's tendency toward free-form transformation, seeking instead to reestablish the unadorned and unmediated body as the source of every animated line. Tsuji's charcoals push anime to continually return to its founding gestures of drawing and erasing, while never forgetting the dark afterimage of so much carbon shifted around the page.

Notes

1. W. J. T. Mitchell, "Architecture as Sculpture as Drawing: Antony Gormley's Paragone," in *Antony Gormley: Blind Light*, eds. Anthony Vidler, Susan Stewart, and W. J. T. Mitchell (London: Hayward Publishing, 2007). Quoted in Isobel Harbison and Brian Dillon, *The End of the Line: Attitudes in Drawing* (London: Hayward Publishing, 2009), 6.

2. Rosalind Krauss, "'The Rock': William Kentridge's Drawings for Projection," *October* 92 (Spring 2000): 25.

3. "Kurōzu appu: Mokutanga anime no eizō sakka Tsuji Naoyuki" (Close up: Charcoal anime moving image maker Tsuji Naoyuki), *Yomiuri shinbun*, morning edition, July 4, 2005; Gerald W. R. Ward, ed., *The Grove Encyclopedia of Materials and Techniques in Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 102.

4. Quoted in Akira Mizuta Lippitt, "Archetexts: Lascaux, Eros, and the Anamorphic Subject," *Discourse* 24, no. 2 (Spring 2002): 23; emphasis in original.
5. Harbison and Dillon, *The End of the Line*, 92.
6. Quote from "Naoyuki Tsuji," *Gallery Simon* website, http://www.gallerysimon.net/CV/tsuji_english.html.
7. From a prescreening talk at Image Forum, Tokyo, celebrating the release of Image Forum's *Thinking and Drawing* DVD (an anthology including *A Feather Stare at the Dark*). Quoted in Eichi, "'Kansō' saikin mita eiga, 'Gyakkyō nain' 'Yami o mitsumeru hane' hoka" (Thoughts on recently seen films 'Adversity Nine,' 'Feather Stare at the Dark,' etc.), *Aa, terebi to shinema—zakki* (Ah, Television and Cinema—Scattered Thoughts) blog, <http://d.hatena.ne.jp/eichi44/20050813/p2>. My translation.
8. Krauss, "'The Rock,'" 10.
9. *Ibid.*, 17.
10. Kitakōji Takashi, "Tsuji Naoyuki 'Mittsu no kumo': Toraware to kaihō o meguru torirojii" (Tsuji Naoyuki "Trilogy about clouds": Trilogy on captivity and liberation), *Bijutsu techō* 57, no. 868 (August 2005): 123.
11. Tsuji describes it as the boy's left hand but in the film it is clearly his right. Tsuji Naoyuki, "Yami o mitsumeru hane" (Feather Stare at the Dark), *Tsuji Naoyuki* blog, <http://cannes.exblog.jp/423227/>. My translation.
12. The arboreal basis of charcoal drawing is clearer in Japanese, as the word for charcoal (*mokutan*) begins with the character for tree (*moku*).
13. Tomio Koyama Gallery, "Artist Interview: Tsuji Naoyuki," <http://www.tomio-koyamagallery.com/interviews/naoyuki-tsuji-interview-2009/>; Kitakōji, "Tsuji Naoyuki 'Mittsu no kumo,'" 123.
14. Numerous commentators have noted the influence of apocalyptic anime and manga narratives on the group's historical imagination. See Miyadai Shinji, *Owarinaki nichijō o ikiro: Ōmu kanzen kokufuku manyuaru* (Living the endless everyday: Complete guide to defeating Aum) (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1995).
15. Tsuji Naoyuki, Okabe Masao, Miyaoka Hideyuki, and Minamoto Asako, "Tsukuru ~ creation ~ Tsuji Naoyuki o chūshin ni" (Making ~ creation ~ focus on Tsuji Naoyuki), symposium at Doshisha University, Kyoto, November 20, 2008. Transcript at http://1st.geocities.jp/mothermonika/m_works/screening/tsuji_screening.html.
16. While working at radically different scales, *A Feather Stare at the Dark* makes an interesting comparison with the contemporaneous television anime series *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995–96, *Shinseiki Evangelion*), which similarly seeks to make sense of the animated apocalypse in post-Aum Japan. *Evangelion* continuously shuttles between the fragile physicality of its young male protagonist and mythical concerns with world creation and destruction. It also presents an infamous sequence in the final episode in which the animation style briefly slips back into rudimentary black ink sketches on white paper, questioning anime's "freedom" to create alternative realities and forcing audiences to confront the hand-drawn origins of the otherwise slickly-produced characters. See Mariana Ortega, "My Father, He Killed Me; My Mother, She Ate Me: Self, Desire, Engendering, and the Mother in *Neon Genesis Evangelion*," *Mechademia* 2 (2007): 216–32.